

Vet visits – ideas to reduce your cat's stress

Cats do not generally like much change in their daily routine and a trip to the Vet is a whole lot of change in a very short period of time, and therefore very stressful. Stress and fear trigger the flight-or-flight response, a rapid wind-up of self protective instincts. Avoiding the triggers for this reaction is the key to success in getting a cat through a trip to the Vet. The cat usually doesn't like leaving home at all so they will resist, if not outright fight, to keep from getting into the carrier. They don't usually like the car trip, due to the noises and G-forces they're not used to from accelerating, turning and slowing. Bumps in the road don't help. Some cats get motion sickness. Arriving at the Veterinary office and seeing, hearing and smelling other animals will put them further on the defensive. The exam itself can further heighten their sense of danger – someone has to inspect, poke, and prod areas of their body not even their closest friends are allowed to touch at home.

Anything you can do to reduce the cat's anxiety and fear will help with that visit, and pay a bonus for years to come because cats tend to return to the Vet in the state of mind they went home in the previous visit. So, what can we do to reduce the fear and flight-or-flight responses that come from it? Here are some ideas that might help:

- 1) We believe that cats should be confined in carriers (or old pillow cases, cardboard boxes, laundry baskets, etc) for their own safety, and yours, during the car ride and inside the clinic. We have seen loose cats escape their owners' hold grasp in our parking lot on the way into the clinic and take off running. We have also had cats become wedged and stuck under car seats, and once, up inside a car's dashboard. Also, consider the hazard of a cat under your brake pedal. Most cats actually appear to have less anxiety when in a carrier than they do when loose in the car and clinic. They may be afraid of the carrier at home but once they're in it, it's their best friend. Lots of bad things can happen if they aren't secured in a carrier for the trip.
- 2) Often, the sound of preparing the carrier for the trip tips the cat off, so having it set up in a closet (or somewhere similar) with the top or door open and ready to receive the cat for a couple of days before the visit will remove that tip. The day of the appointment you have the cat in your lap, walk them over to the closet, open the door and drop them into the carrier before they can react. Similarly, you can have the carrier in a "forbidden" place or out-of-bounds room before hand, and let them "sneak" into that room before the appointment, then scoop them up into the carrier before they realize what's happening.
- 3) Alternatively it's really helpful to get cats used to the sight of the carrier before the day of the visit. Leaving the carrier out in plain view with the door open and some comfortable bedding and maybe a favorite toy or some catnip inside can reduce the fear from the sudden appearance of the carrier. In the best case, they might actually sleep in the carrier occasionally, and you may be able to catch them sleeping in it just in time for the trip to the Vet. And at the very least, the sudden appearance of the carrier will no longer tip them off about the trip to the Vet.
- 4) It can help to spray Feliway, a facial pheromone of cats that induces a calmer, more tranquil state of mind, into the carrier before loading the cat.
- 5) Have some nice, cushy towels or a cat bed in the carrier before loading up for the trip. Load the cat into the carrier by coaxing them into it with some food or catnip, or by loading them in backwards, tail-first. Tipping the carrier on-end and dropping them (gently) into it back feet first from above can also help. A carrier with a top that opens can simplify the whole process a lot, too.

- 6) In most instances, it's better to have one animal per carrier. Sometimes even peaceful companions can pick up on each other's fear and turn on each other. Having more than one cat in a carrier can make it quite challenging to get them out in the exam room if either one is angry and scared. If one cat gets car sick or loses control of their bowels it can be that much messier with a second cat in the same carrier.
- 7) In the car, keeping some gentle, soothing music on will help some cats stay a little calmer.
- 8) Take it easy in the car, to lessen the G-forces from turning, stopping and starting too abruptly. These are anxiety-provoking unfamiliar sensations for cats. We're not trying to tell you how to drive, just how to avoid upsetting your cats on the way to the practice. This can also help to reduce motion sickness to some degree.
- 9) Although the carrier provides a sense of security to the cat, if they see other animals approaching they could feel very vulnerable to attack, so keeping the carrier covered with a towel to block the view of other animals can help keep them calmer. It's never a good idea to let a cat out of their cage in the waiting room unless their on a leash.
- 10) Carriers that have removable or openable tops are preferred. An animal that's already scared should not be dragged or dumped out of the carrier in the exam room. The more resistance and fear the removal from the carrier itself causes, the harder the exam will be. Removing the top of the carrier takes a minute, but it's a minute well spent if it reduces the stress and fear for the cat, and it usually saves time in the long run.
- 11) Sometimes drugs are necessary to get a cat through the examination process. Sedatives or anti-anxiety drugs are most often used, and should be tried before assuming a difficult cat will be impossible. It can take a trial-and-error process and repeated visits to determine which drug will work best for any given cat. Sedatives are given at home one to two hours before leaving for the visit, whereas anti-anxiety drugs are given once a day starting several days in advance. If one approach doesn't work, we can try another. Ask us about these drug options before giving up.
- 12) Please let us know if your cat has had negative experiences or has needed sedation during previous Veterinary visits so we can make adjustments for the next visit.
- 13) Some animals may be effectively desensitized to much of this process by being taken out on extra "pleasure" trips - go through the whole process of getting them loaded into the carrier and into the car, then go driving with them somewhere besides the Vet. Positive reinforcement – strokes, pets, brushing, treats, and the like - along the way will increase the chances of more relaxed trips in the future.

Clinic of Issaquah
84 Front St S
Issaquah, WA 98027
(425)391-0773

Facebook



www.catclinicofissaquah.com

